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OR

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FINE ARTS.

On the past and present state of the Fine Arts in Ireland.

No. I.

We have already informed the public of our intention of giving to the promotion of the Fine Arts in Ireland, the zealous assistance of our Journal. We now repeat the promise more explicitly—we shall do so to the very utmost of our ability, animated by the pleasing hope that our exertions will be found eminently useful.

The Fine Arts properly so called, or the arts of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, have never hitherto, in Ireland, had their chronicle, or indeed, received the slightest aid from the literature of their country. It would be easy to assign probable and sufficient causes for such neglect, but in this place it is enough to state the fact, coupled as it is with its melancholy consequence, that whenever genius of a higher order has appeared among us, and such instances have not been uncommon, we have rarely discovered how it should have been appreciated, till it had fled for ever from our shores.

But brighter prospects appear to be at length opening: great changes have recently taken place in the political world, and if the expected results be realized, as we trust they will, the Fine Arts must participate in the blessing, and their amiable professors see better days. Our minds, no longer engaged in the harrowing broils of political and religious strife, will seek the soft and humanizing enjoyments which the cultivation of the taste can alone impart, and we shall find our reward in the acquisition of a new sense more ennobling to our nature, and more closely allied to the Divinity, than those already enjoyed in common with the lower animals. A green field will be no longer a green field "and nothing more" to us, for we shall have acquired the power of seeing the unspeakable beauty as well as wisdom exhibited in all the works of the Creator; and that beauty cannot fail of entering deep into our souls, and of aiding our exertions to become worthy of a higher state of existence.

We commence in our present number, a brief review of the past and present state of the Fine Arts in Ireland.

The early civilization of Ireland has been a favorite theme with the Irish writers of Milesian origin, for nearly two centuries, while all claims to any removal from utter barbarism previous to the arrival of the English, have generally been denied with equal warmth by Anglo-Irish and other writers. Prejudices, springing chiefly from political feelings, have equally blinded both sides, and an able and impartial work on the ancient state of Ireland is still a desideratum. We may smile at the description of the "Architectonical magnificence" of the Palace of Eamania, erected 354 years before our era, given on the authority of a Bardic

writer in the magniloquent pages of O'Connor, or laugh outright at the visionary O'Halloran's account of the sculptured effigies on the tombs of the Pagan Kings at the Royal Cemetery of Cruachan, derived from the poem of Torna Egeas, a bard of the fourth century. The very passages cited, so far from being evidence for the circumstances they relate, are only stubborn proofs of the comparatively modern manufacture of the poems in which they occur. Yet we are not rashly to infer that the ancient Irish must necessarily have been savage, because enthusiastic writers have endeavoured to prove them civilized on insufficient data. Let us look at the other side, and we shall find the charges of ignorance and barbarism resting on no better foundation. One or two examples will suffice. "There is at this day," says Sir William Petty, "no monument or real argument, that when the Irish were first invaded, they had any stone housing at all, any money, any foreign trade, nor any learning but the legend of the Saints, Psalter, Missals, Rituals, &c. viz. no Geometry, Astronomy, Anatomy, Architecture, Engineering, Painting, Carving, nor any kind of Manufacture, nor the least use of Navigation or the Art military." We cannot laugh at this tirade, for we confess we have some drops of Milesian blood in our veins, but in Sir William's own style, we shall for the present observe, that we have abundant monuments and real arguments, to prove that the above remarks, as applied by him to the period immediately preceding the arrival of the English, are a tissue of falsehoods, without any the least admixture of truth. Yet his is moderate language compared with that of the learned, but dogmatic John Pinkerton. "The contest," he observes, "between those Irish writers and the literati of Europe, is the most risible in the world. The former say, their country was highly civilized, had letters and academies as the Greeks and Romans. The latter say, the Greeks we know, and the Romans we know, but who are ye? Those Greeks and Romans pronounce you not only barbarous, but utterly savage. Where are your authorities against this? In the name of science, of argument, of common sense, where are the slightest marks of ancient civilization among you? Where are ruins of cities? Where inscriptions? Where ancient coins? Where is the least trace of ancient art or science in your whole island? The old inhabitants of your country, the wild Irish, the true Milesian breed, untainted with Gothic blood, we know to be rude clans to this day. Can a nation once civilized become savage? Impossible.—Such a nation may be lost in effeminacy, as the modern Italians and Greeks, but will ever bear marks of the excess, not the want of civilization." Milesian reader, what say you to all this? You are struck dumb. Well, we shall take up the shillelagh in your defence for a few moments. You, John Pinkerton, say, that

"the Greeks and Romans pronounce us not only barbarous, but utterly savage." We answer—it is perfectly certain that the Greeks and Romans knew hardly any thing about us. Tacitus, the only early writer who had any authentic information, says, that our harbours were better known to merchants than those of Britain. You ask, "In the name of science, of argument, of common sense, where are the slightest marks of ancient civilization amongst us?" We answer, in our ancient monarchy, which, you yourself acknowledge, has higher claims to antiquity than any other in Europe. In our ancient institutions, our Brehon laws, our music, our poetry, and our monumental remains. "Where are ruins of cities?" Ptolemy, a Greek geographer of the second century, marks nine cities of note in his map of Ireland, and considerable remains of some of these are yet to be seen. "Where inscriptions?" Many have been discovered, not including the impudent forgery on Callan mountain. "Where ancient coins?" We acknowledge we have none. But you yourself tell us, that it was perhaps a thousand years before our era, that the Phoenicians traded to Britain and Ireland, (agreeing pretty nearly with the calculations of our native writers,) and you elsewhere say, that the Phoenicians did not coin money till six hundred years later. Do you expect our Phoenician ancestors should have had coins 600 years before they had learned how to make them? You also say elsewhere, that "had the Phoenicians settled in any part of Britain or Ireland, their usual splendour would have attended them, a few Phoenician coins," you add, "may perhaps be found in Britain and Ireland, a circumstance naturally to be expected from their trading there, but had there been any settlements, there would have been ruins and numerous coins struck at the settlement, as at all those in Spain." To all this, it is only necessary to reply, that there are no remains of Phoenician cities now to be found in Spain, and that the Punic coins and inscriptions found there, are clearly of Carthaginian origin, and consequently cannot claim a very remote antiquity. Had the Irish asserted a descent from the Carthaginians, the want of such inscriptions and coins would be conclusive against them; but as the learned Lord Ross, (then Sir L. Parsons,) observes, no writer of note has ever said so, and we refer the reader to that distinguished nobleman's "Défense of the Ancient History of Ireland," for conclusive arguments on that point. Mr. Pinkerton finally shouts, "Where is the least trace of ancient art or science in your whole island?" We respond, they are exhibited abundantly in the numerous antiquities of gold, silver, and bronze, dug up every day in all parts of Ireland, and similar to the most ancient remains of the Greeks, Egyptians and Phoenicians. Our gold crowns, collars, bracelets, anklets, our brazen swords, spears, and domestic

vessels—our cinerary urns, our cairns with sepulchral chambers, which are not to be paralleled in the British isles—and lastly, in those Cyclopean works, agreeing identically with those in the islands, and on the shores of the Mediterranean, universally attributed to the Phœnicians.—These are the evidences of the early colonization of Ireland, by a civilized people, which her antiquaries should chiefly rely on, and not the dreams of visionary etymologists, or the traditions preserved, and perhaps distorted, by monkish chroniclers, and ignorant bards. If a judicious selection of the antique monuments and other remains found in Ireland, were carefully drawn by some capable artist, and published, our claims to an early civilization would be instantly conceded by the unprejudiced and learned.

But while we thus support the theories of the Milesian writers, we are far from asserting that a knowledge of the Fine Arts was introduced into the country in those remote times. It would be folly to ground such a supposition upon idle conjecture; and there is little else on which to found it. Infant colonies do not often carry a knowledge of the Fine Arts along with them; they are only to be found where wealth, luxury and peace have fixed their abode. The domestic arts, the traditions, the religion, the poetry, and the music of a people, will accompany them every where, because these are fixed in their minds, and transferred from generation to generation. The Irish colonists, we are told, brought with them their priest, their artificer, their bard, and their musician; but we hear nothing of their painter, their sculptor, or their architect. What remains of the Fine Arts have the Romans left in Britain? Their relics are only monuments of barbarism. Yet, unquestionably, they colonized that island at the period of their greatest refinement. What knowledge of the Fine Arts have the British colonies of America, at the present day? Besides, we are in great ignorance as to the length the Phœnicians themselves had proceeded at this early time, in the cultivation of those arts. Idolatry, or image worship, which may be called the parent of sculpture, was as yet unknown to them, and the column and the arch were not introduced into architecture for ages after. The existing remains of ancient edifices in Europe, attributed to the Phœnicians, are remarkable only for a rude and simple grandeur. The only indications of taste in the arts of design, previous to the introduction of Christianity, discoverable in Ireland, are those which our antiquities exhibit. Our gold and silver ornaments, bronze weapons, and domestic vessels, are often elegant in design and workmanship; and some of our sepulchral urns, ornamented with mouldings in bas-relief, shew, at least, an acquaintance with the forms in use among a refined people. A few small bronze figures have been found in our bogs, and ignorantly called idols, but most of them are evidently christian; and the one or two which are not so—figures of victory on a globe, the ornament of a standard—look like imitations of Roman-British work, or were, perhaps, actual spoils of the Scots in Britain.

The introduction of Christianity commences a new era in the history of the Fine Arts in Ireland. Whether it proceeded originally from Rome, or elsewhere, is still a mystery, notwithstanding all that has been written on the subject. This, however, is an enquiry foreign to our purpose; but we may observe, that the

bloodless conversion of a people to a new mode of faith, gives strong evidence of their being at the time, far removed from utter barbarism. The oldest accounts of the progress of Patrick through Ireland, present us with many particulars tending to that conclusion. How interesting is that passage in the collections of Tirechan, a writer of the seventh century, in which we learn, that the Saint on paying *the sum ordained by law*, was furnished by a Pagan king, who would not renounce the religion of his fathers, with a passport and an escort of twelve men, to enable him, with his little army of bishops, priests, and laymen, to traverse Ireland from one extremity of the island to the other. This tolerant spirit, and the subsequent conversion of the nation to the Christian faith, soon drew a crowd of foreigners from the most civilized parts of the globe, to lead a life of religious peace and seclusion in the Western isle, and procured for her the epithets of “*Insula Sanctorum*” and “*Insula Sacra*.” Of the great extent of this influx we have abundant testimony, particularly in the ancient litany used in Ireland, in the sixth and seventh centuries, as preserved by St. Engus, in which the holy foreigners interred in Ireland, are invoked. For example:—

“*Sanctos Romanos, qui jacent in Achadh Galma in Ybh Echta, invoco in auxilium meum per Jesum Christum, &c.*”
 “*SS. Romanos de Lettr erca, invoco, &c.*”
 “*SS. Peregrinos de Cluan mhoir invoco, &c.*”
 “*SS. Duodecim Conchenacios qui cum utroque Sinchello jacent in Kill Achuidh, invoco, &c.*”
 “*SS. Septem monachos Egyptios qui jacent in Disert Uledh, invoco, &c.*”
 “*SS. Centum quinquaginta Peregrinos Romanos et Italos, qui comitati sunt S. Abbanum in Hiberniam, invoco, &c.*”
 “*SS. Gallos de Saliduic, invoco, &c.*”
 “*SS. Sexones (i. Anglos) de Rigair, invoco, &c.*”
 “*SS. Quinquaginta Monachos de Britania socios filii Mainan in Glenloire, invoco, &c.*”
 “*SS. 510, qui ex partibus transmarinis veneruntur cum S. Boethio Episcopo, invoco, &c.*”

with many more enumerated in that curious little book.

In this litany we find no mention of Greeks, a circumstance which may be attributed to the differences between the Greek and Roman churches in those ages, and the triumph of the latter in Ireland after the preaching of St. Patrick; but we have abundant evidence, elsewhere, that many came into Ireland, and that the Irish, who probably received their first knowledge of Christianity from the East, were not unacquainted with Greek literature.

It is to these circumstances that we are to attribute the subsequent celebrity of Ireland for piety and learning, when the Continent of Europe became involved in almost total darkness, and that the Western island was enabled to send forth to the benighted regions, what Gibbon calls, perhaps justly, a feeble ray of science and superstition, but strong enough, however, to endure and to illuminate, and ultimately to kindle into a blaze, that lighted up all Europe.

The arts thus propagated in Ireland were corrupt and debased, but they had still a touch of the Greek and Roman glory. They were circumscribed too, in their influence, for the clergy were their sole depositaries, who employed them, perhaps exclusively, to the service of their religion. The building and decorating of churches and other religious edifices, the illuminating of religious books, the carving of tombs and crosses, and above all, the manufacture in brass and other metals of shrines, crosses, crosiers, and other sacred utensils—such were the

chief objects on which the arts were employed, and to what other purposes in those ages could we expect them to have been applied?

Till this period, the Irish were apparently unacquainted with the use of lime cement in building, together with the arch, the column, and other architectural ornaments; and in their earliest churches, which are characterized by an uniformity of plan of extreme simplicity, these novelties were very sparingly employed. Those edifices were of an oblong form, with a smaller oblong branching from it towards the East, and connected with the former by a choir arch, or *Arcus triumphalis*; this arch, as well as the door way entering from the West, were frequently ornamented with pilasters or three quarter columns and ornamented mouldings, and the chief, or sometimes only light which the building received was from small open apertures or windows in the East end, or sanctuary, in which the altar was placed: the use of glass in windows was not introduced till some centuries later. Simple as was this plan, it was not inconsistent with the suggestions of good taste, or unmarked by the characteristics of propriety and fitness, and the model appears to have been derived from the most ancient temples of the East. Occasionally, however, the churches exhibited a greater variety in their form, as well as richness in their decorations, as appears from the description of St. Bridgid's church at Kildare, by Cogitosus.

The Sculptor's labor in those early ages was chiefly employed on the stone crosses, erected for various purposes in the vicinity of the churches, or the capitals of columns and other architectural ornaments: statues, properly so called, were not generally introduced for some centuries later, the prejudices of the people being opposed to them. Monumental effigies earlier than the twelfth century are not found in Ireland, and appear to have been introduced by the Anglo Normans; the ancient Irish tombs present only ornamented crosses. The stone crosses have little variety in their general form, but are frequently rich and elaborate in ornament, or loaded with scriptural subjects in bas relief: the latter, though rude in design, often exhibit an acquaintance with classical forms and costumes, and such an agreement in style with the Greek and Roman sculptures of the same ages, as leaves little doubt of their being the work of foreign hands. The same remark may be applied to the croziers, shrines, and other works of the carvers and workers in metal, many of which are still preserved in the cabinets of the curious: Asicus Bishop of Elphin, the worker in metals for St. Patrick, betrays apparently in his name a Roman origin. Many of those interesting relics exhibit such an extraordinary acquaintance with the art of jewellery, as would excite admiration in the mind of a skilful artist of the present day. They are usually carved with great delicacy, inlaid with gold and silver, enamelled, and ornamented with precious stones of foreign production.

The works of the painter are generally less enduring than those of the sculptor or architect, and but small vestiges of their skill in those times, have descended to us. Cogitosus, a writer of the 7th century, speaks of the painted pictures (*ac decorata pictis tabulis*) which decorated the Church of St. Bridgid, at Kildare, and but for that notice we should now, perhaps, be ignorant that the art was thus employed at so early a period. The most ancient

remains of frescos, to be found in Ireland at present, are those in the choir of Cormac's Chapel, at Cashel: they are merely ornamental in their design, but exhibit still a great richness in their colours. Such examples, however, it is probable, were always rare; the chief purpose for which the skill of the painter was required being the illumination of religious books. Geraldus Cambrensis speaks in terms of astonishment and admiration of the copy of the four Gospels, which he saw at Kildare, and which, in the fashion of those days, was supposed to have been dictated by an angel to a scribe, in the presence of St. Bridgid, and for her use. After dilating on the variety in the designs, the delicacy of the execution, and the richness of the colouring, in the embellishments of this book, he adds, that they appeared rather to be the work of an angel, than of a man; ("ut vere haec omnia angelicā potius quam humā diligentia jam asseveraveris esse compōsita.") Haec equidem quanto frequenter et diligenter intueor, semper quasi novis obstupeo, semperque magis ac magis admiranda conspicio; nec Apelles ipse simili efficerē possit, et manu potius non mortali efformatae, ac depictae vide-rentur.") St. Bridgid's book is unfortunately no longer to be found; but we have some works of nearly the same age, from which we may learn the character of art which had been deemed worthy of such enthusiastic approbation. In the copy of the four gospels, written by St. Columbkille,* still preserved in the College library, there are two or three pictures, which have an elaborate minuteness, and a certain Byzantine richness, that might well excite the wonder and admiration of a rude age.

We have thus traced with a rapid, but not careless hand, the first dawnings of the Fine Arts in Ireland. The subject is an interesting one, and capable of much curious illustration, but which the nature of our Journal prohibits our indulging in. Their subsequent progress, from the 8th to the 12th century, may be noticed in a few words. Whatever change they underwent was for the worse. The country, overrun by the Danes, a barbarous and unlettered race, became an arena of rapine and of blood; and while the people were so long engaged in perpetual warfare, that they acquired the ferocity and lawless habits of their invaders, they necessarily ceased to practice, if they did not wholly forget, whatever they had previously learned of the arts of peace.

Thus far we have treated of the condition of the Fine Arts in the remoter periods of antiquity, and vindicated, we trust successfully, the early character of our country, from the aspersions which have been so causelessly and ignorantly cast upon it. The remaining portion of our task, to which we shall return with pleasure and alacrity, will, doubtless, prove more deeply interesting to the general reader, as it will no longer be exclusively conversant about antiquarian remains, among which, however we ourselves may delight to linger, we are well aware we cannot be so sure of carrying our reader's sympathies along with us, unless indeed in the investigation of an important national question, his patriotism may happily lend strength to his patience.

* We were much amused to observe, some time ago, in a number of the Edinburgh Review, that the critic in reviewing a Work on the History of Ireland, to which he gives a much higher character than it deserves, makes merry over the "odd slip" of the writer, because he speaks of Columbkille as a man, instead of a place.

REVIEWS OF BOOKS.

Third Series of Tales of the Munster Festivals.—The Rivals.—Tracy's Ambition. By the author of the *Collegians*. 3 vols. 8vo. London, Saunders and Otley, 1830.

We have just received, in sheets, a copy of these two rather unhappily named tales, and hasten to present our readers with some account of a Work, which if, as we trust, it meets its deserts, will soon be in every body's hands. Since the publication of the first series of Tales of the Munster Festivals, containing the Half Sir and Suil Dhuv, the Coiner, we have considered Mr. Griffin, the author, as by far the most capable writer who has undertaken to delineate the character of the Southern Irish in the present day. Mr. Griffin evidently describes from a thorough, intimate, and personal acquaintance with the people and the scenes which he pourtrays, and it is not too much to say, that his stories evince true genius, and that of no subordinate character, in their admirably faithful exposition of the manners, the habits, the peculiar modes of thought and expression, the lively impulses, the vices and the crimes, of our wayward, yet very intelligent, fellow countrymen.

The *Collegians*, which formed the second series of these tales, fully sustained the author's previous high reputation. In his earlier efforts, Mr. Griffin betrayed deplorable want of skill in the art of managing his story. His narratives were confused and obscure, and his descriptions of natural scenery, which are always excellent in themselves, were often brought in by him in the most unnatural way, besides that he had an unhappy knack of breaking the thread of the story, and destroying all possibility of illusion, by speaking in his own personal character as author; a species of parabasis which, whatever good purpose it may have answered in the ancient Greek comedy, is, in modern novel writing, exceedingly clumsy and disagreeable. These faults our author has gradually and greatly amended, though we cannot, even yet, compliment him upon having attained the requisite degree of acquaintance with the art of concocting, arranging, and developing a complete and highly wrought story. From the glaring defects, in this respect, of most cotemporary Irish writers of fiction, he is, however, in a great measure, free, and since Miss Edgeworth seems resolved to favour us no more with national tales, we hesitate not to assign the Irish championship of the pen to Mr. Griffin, at least till some more sturdy competitor, than he has yet had to encounter, shall arise.

Of the two tales which constitute the present volumes, the scene of the first is laid in our well known and romantic county of Wicklow; and our author tells us, that he gathered the groundwork of the story, from the relation of a guide who escorted him through the vale of Glendalough, or to use the designation by which it is more generally known to strangers, the valley of the Seven Churches. It is, no doubt, the privilege of genius to draw materials for its exercise from sources which to others would afford occasions only of weariness or annoyance, as the bee is said to sip honey from the most unsightly weed; but for our own parts, the recollections with which the garrulous and mercenary loquacity of county Wicklow guides are associated in our minds, have, until now, been any thing but

pleasing. Nor do we think that Mr. Griffin himself, has been particularly happy in the selection of his story. Growing as it does out of the peculiar political relations of our people, there is a great deal too much, as we conceive, relating to magisterial duties and tithe-proctors, and process-servers and policemen, as well as of a querulous tone respecting the existing state of affairs in the Irish nation, which does not please our fancy in a work of fiction; and the numerous dialogues and remarks upon the efforts employed of late years for the conversion of Roman Catholics to the Protestant faith, and the air of ridicule that is thrown over them, appear to us in a very questionable taste, coming, as they do, from the pen of a Roman Catholic novelist. We may add, that the most prominent incident upon which the action of the story turns, seems to us in a high degree unnatural, we had almost said revolting. Still the master-hand of genius is clearly discernible throughout, and more, far more, than redeems the defects which we have censured. Mr. Griffin does not venture on a full length portraiture of female character in any of his works; and in this, perhaps, he shews his judgment, for we think him much more happy in the delineation of wit and humour, and shrewdness, in short of the whole character of the Munster peasant, than in that of the more delicate, and to the unpractised eye, almost imperceptible traits, which distinguish the characters of persons of a higher grade, and still more, those of our fair countrywomen.

In his "parables" or stories introduced in the mouth of some native original, our author stands unrivalled; and as we do not intend to forestall the reader's pleasure in the perusal of the work itself, by any analysis or meagre outline of the plot, we shall present him rather with the following episode, which is perfectly independent of the story. It is only necessary to premise, that the legend is told in answer to a query as to the origin of the couplet familiar to Irish ears,

Happy is the bride that the sun shines on,
Happy is the corpse that the rain rains upon,
and that we have joined together the parts, which, in the story, are severed by a very portentous and important interruption.—

'Why then I will sir, tell you that:' said David, crossing his feet at full length, and lowering his head upon his breast. 'A couple, sir, that was there of a time, an' they hadn't only the one son, an' plenty of every thing about 'em. Well, himself was a very good man, he never sent a beggar away empty-handed from his house, he gave clothes to the naked, and food to the hungry, an' drhink to the drhy, an' every whole ha'p'orth, all to one thing alone, an' that was, that he never allowed any poor person to sleep a night inside his doore, be they ever so tired, because his wife was a terrible woman, an' he was in dhrread of her tongue. As for her, the only thing she ever gave to any one in her life was an ould tatther'd skreed of a flannel petticoat she gave to one poor woman, an' the sheep's trotters that she used to have thrown out in the doore to 'em when they'd be crowdin' about it aither dinner.

'Well, it so happened, as things will happen, that the man died; an' if he did, the day he was buried, the rain kep' powerin' down equal to a flood, until they had him laid in the grave. An' it isn't long after until the woman